

THE BREEDING OF THE MIGRANT SHRIKE AT
HATLEY, STANSTEAD COUNTY, QUEBEC, 1916.¹

BY H. MOUSLEY.

THE Migrant Shrike (*Lanius ludovicianus migrans*) like the Prairie Horned Lark is an interesting species, and one which has increased in numbers ever since the clearing of the country, having invaded the eastern side of the continent principally, I suppose, from the Mississippi Valley. As to the exact date of its first breeding here, I cannot say, but some idea may be formed when we consider that it was first recorded as doing so in Maine in 1877, and in Vermont the same year, the latter state adjoining the County of Stanstead on the south, and the former not being more than thirty miles distant on the east at its nearest point.

As already indicated in my 'Five years notes and observations on the birds of Hatley' (Auk, Vol. XXXIII, 1916, pp. 57-73, 168-186), the species is by no means plentiful here, and until the present year I had only been able to locate two nests, and these some three miles or more away from Hatley. However, during the present year I have been fortunate in finding a pair breeding within half a mile south of Hatley Village, and under circumstances which I think are well worth recording. Now my previous earliest date of arrival here for the species was April 13, but on March 28 of the present year I saw an example quite close to my house, but it was not until towards the end of April that my youngest son reported having seen another on two or three occasions near the village and always about in the same locality. This set me thinking, and knowing the ways of shrikes I came to the conclusion that probably it was nesting not far off. With this in view I set off to inspect the locality on April 29, and soon found a shrike perched on the telephone wire, near a tall fir tree (the lower

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branches of which had been cut off) which stood at the side of the road leading from Hatley to Stanstead village. There were a number of thorn and apple trees (the favorite nesting sites of these birds) scattered about over a rather large area, so I proceeded to examine each one carefully, but not a sign of a nest could I discover, or could I find the shrike again; and as it was about noon I returned home, deciding to visit the locality later on in the afternoon. On arrival, however, at the place no signs could be seen of any shrike, but on ascending some rising ground near the tall fir tree already mentioned, I put one up off the ground, and at once decided to follow it wherever it went. It was not long before this one was joined by another, and a pretty dance the pair led me the whole of that afternoon, further and further away from the site of the tall fir tree near which I had put the first bird up, so that at last I had to give up the game in disgust and return home. That they were nesting I felt sure and I got some little encouragement when on one occasion the female tried to dislodge several pieces of coarse grass that had got wedged in some brushwood, but failing to do so she finally desisted. However, to make up for it I got an insight into the affection of these birds for one another, for never on the whole of that afternoon were they very far apart, and on several occasions I saw the male feed his mate with what he no doubt considered some extra tid-bit. There was no chasing of any small birds or the spiking on thorns of the food they obtained (which was always off the ground, and consisted no doubt of beetles, grasshoppers and the like), everything was eaten. On my return home I was thoroughly puzzled, as I had examined every tree in the neighborhood except one, that tall fir tree! But there, I said to myself, shrikes do not usually nest in fir trees, and if they do, it would have to be above the average height in this particular one, as all the lower branches had been cut off as already mentioned. With this I went through all my text books, with the same result, every author except two giving apple trees or thorn bushes as the favorite site for the nest and the elevation a low one, usually from four to ten feet above the ground. The two exceptions mentioned above were Harold H. Bailey who in his 'The Birds of Virginia' 1913, p. 268, says from ten to thirty feet up, but gives no specific instance of a nest having

been found at such an extraordinary height as thirty feet; the other author being the late Ora W. Knight, who in his 'Birds of Maine' 1908, p. 471, gives a specific instance of a nest having been found near Bangor in May, 1896, in the forks of a balsam fir tree sixteen feet from the ground. After reading these two accounts the whole thing seemed to become perfectly clear, and I could see the nest in my mind's eye in that solitary fir tree by the roadside and at a great elevation too, and that no doubt was the reason why the birds kept leading me away from it in the afternoon. On the following morning I visited the site again and secreting myself, had the satisfaction, after waiting half an hour, of seeing one of the birds with building material enter a dense portion of the fir tree very near the top. This was on April 30, but it was not until May 10 that I climbed to the nest (which could not be seen from the ground) and found the female sitting on a set of five eggs, in a most beautiful and symmetrical nest, which was built in some forks close to the trunk, and at the record height of thirty-four feet above the ground. The foundation of the nest consisted of fir twigs, rootlets, string and that favorite material of most birds here, the stalks and flower heads of the pearly everlasting. The lining was formed of wool, plant down, and a good supply of feathers, and the dimensions were as follows, viz.: outside diameter 6, inside $2\frac{3}{4}$ inches; outside depth $4\frac{1}{2}$, inside $2\frac{1}{4}$ inches.

The eggs were finely and evenly spotted all over, the average size being $1.02 \times .73$, and these I took, more especially as I wanted to try and solve the problem as to why the birds had selected this abnormal site. Was it hereditary, or merely a case of environment? If the former, then the birds at their second venture ought by rights to select some equally high elevation, not necessarily in a fir, but in some other tree; but if the latter was the case then one of the apple trees or bushes close at hand ought to be used, as birds seldom or never build again in the same tree, directly after being robbed of their first set of eggs, and therefore would not make use of the fir tree again. Now it must be borne in mind that at the time of nesting the apple trees and bushes were not in leaf, but by accident in the midst of them there stood this solitary fir with excellent cover. Is it not reasonable then to suppose that the birds seeing this, took advantage of their environment, and

built in that fir in preference to the exposed and leafless apple trees and bushes?

At all events, this was the view I took of the matter at the time, and I think that after events will show that perhaps I may not have been so very far wrong. On the day following the taking of the eggs, I left home as I thought for about a week, but owing to unforeseen circumstances it was not until June 29 that I was able to visit the spot again, when on walking to the village of Hatley, and after having just passed the tall fir on the roadside, I heard a great commotion in some bushes and young trees not far off, and there sure enough were the five young Shrikes of the second brood, being fed by their parents, and just able to fly nicely. It took me only a few minutes to locate the nest in an apple tree eight feet up, and only eighty-five yards distant from the site of the first nest in the fir. And so matters had worked out as I had expected, and the birds had reverted to a natural elevation and site, which I feel sure would have been the case in the first instance, if it had not been for the excellent cover afforded by that accidental fir tree being on the ground that the birds had selected as eminently suitable for affording them their necessary food supply.